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Tracing Full Preterism's Historical Development

# The Historiography of Consummation: Tracing the Preterist Hermeneutic from the Apostolic Age to the Nineteenth Century

The theological discipline of eschatology has long been defined by the tension between the "already" and the "not yet." Within this spectrum, Preterism—derived from the Latin *praeter*, meaning "past" or "gone by"—represents a systematic conviction that the majority of biblical prophecies, including those traditionally assigned to the end of the physical world, were fulfilled in the first century of the Christian era, specifically culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem in $70AD$.[1, 2] While modern theological discourse often classifies Full Preterism (or consistent preterism) as a nineteenth-century development, a rigorous historical tracing reveals that its seminal implications and embryonic motifs are visible in the earliest strata of post-apostolic thought. This report traces the trajectory of these concepts from the primitive imminence of Clement of Rome, through the replacement theology of Melito of Sardis, into the polemical defenses of the Counter-Reformation, and finally to the scholarly synthesis of Moses Stuart and the radical consistency of James Stuart Russell.

## The Foundations of Imminence in the Apostolic Fathers

The genesis of preterist thought does not begin with a formal system but with a pervasive atmosphere of expectation. The Apostolic Fathers, writing in the immediate wake of the New Testament era, maintained a posture of radical imminence that would eventually provide the linguistic and conceptual data points for later preterist systems.[3]

### Clement of Rome and the Language of Immediate Expectancy

The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians, generally dated to approximately $95-96AD$ (though some preterist scholars argue for a pre-$70AD$ date based on internal markers), serves as the earliest non-canonical witness to the church's expectation of a "speedy" fulfillment of Christ's promises.[4, 5] In the twenty-third chapter of the epistle, Clement addresses the phenomenon of "double-mindedness" and skepticism regarding the timing of the end. He asserts with authoritative finality that the Lord's will "shall be quickly and suddenly accomplished," citing prophetic witnesses

that "He shall come quickly, and shall not tarry" and that "the Lord shall suddenly come to His temple".[3, 6]

For the preterist interpreter, Clement's usage of the "Analogy of the Vine" is a critical embryonic indicator. Clement compares the progress of divine history to a vine that buds, flowers, produces sour grapes, and finally ripens. He argues that the church is in the final "ripening" stage, implying that the harvest—the consummation—is not a distant, nebulous event but a threshold about to be crossed in his own generation.[5, 6] The causal relationship here is significant: by utilizing the same "nearness" language found in the Olivet Discourse and the Epistles, Clement reinforces a paradigm where the fulfillment is intrinsically linked to the immediate historical horizon of the primitive church.[3, 7]

### The Nature of the Resurrection in the Clementine Framework

Clement's defense of the resurrection in Chapters 24 and 25 involves a series of natural analogies—the cycle of day and night, the sowing of seeds, and the legend of the Phoenix—to argue for the certainty of the promise.[6] While Clement likely viewed the resurrection as a physical event, the *timing* he assigns to it is what informs later preterist thought. By placing the resurrection in the context of a "speedy" coming that will "not tarry," Clement aligns himself with the New Testament "time stamps" that preterists believe were fulfilled at the close of the Jewish age.[2, 5] The implication is that the early church did not possess an "elastic" view of time; rather, they expected the package of events (Parousia, Judgment, Resurrection) to occur as a unified historical climax.[5, 7]

## Melito of Sardis and the Dissolution of the Prototype

As the church moved into the second century, the focus shifted from simple imminence to a more robust theological justification for the "passing away" of the Old Covenant system. Melito, Bishop of Sardis (c. $160 - 180 AD$), provides the seminal replacement theology (supersessionism) that serves as the heart of the preterist hermeneutic.[8, 9]

### The Type/Reality Template in Peri Pascha

Melito's homily *On the Passover* (*Peri Pascha*) represents a monumental shift in early Christian thought. Melito argues that the relationship between the Old and New Covenants is that of a model to a finished product.[8, 10] He posits that every element of the Jewish system—the Law, the Temple, the sacrifices—was a "temporal prototype" or a "prefiguration" that was inherently "destined to be destroyed" once the eternal reality of Christ arrived.[8, 11]

| Melito's Categorization | Temporal Model (Old) | Eternal Reality (New) |
|---|---|---|
| **Character of the Covenant** | Old, temporal, corruptible | New, eternal, incorruptible |
| **Mode of Expression** | The Law / The Type | The Gospel / The Logos |
| **Object of Sacrifice** | The Sheep / The Lamb | The Man / The God |
| **Locus of Presence** | The Jerusalem Below | The Heavenly Jerusalem |

| Melito's Categorization | Temporal Model (Old) | Eternal Reality (New) |
|---|---|---|
| **Duration of Validity** | For a time | Forever |

This categorization provides the "mechanism" for preterism: the physical destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in $70AD$ was not merely a tragic historical accident but the tangible "dissolution" of the prototype. Melito argues that "the law became Logos" and "the old became new," suggesting that the ontological status of Israel as God's chosen nation had been permanently transferred to the church.[10, 11]

### The Judicial Implications of AD 70

Melito's polemic against the Jewish people for their role in the crucifixion of Jesus—the "Israelite right hand" that killed the "King of Israel"—establishes a judicial link between the rejection of Christ and the historical judgment of the nation.[12, 13] He identifies Jerusalem as the "city of the law" that became the site of the ultimate injustice, thereby justifying its removal from the divine plan.[10, 12] For modern preterists, Melito's focus on the "mystery" of the Passover and the "worthlessness" of the Temple after the cross represents a nascent understanding that the "Old Covenant aeon" had ended.[9, 14] The broader implication is that Melito viewed the church as living in the "finished product," a state where the "narrow plot" of Israel had been expanded into the "breadth of grace" across the whole earth.[14]

## The Counter-Reformation and the Codification of the Past

The development of preterism took a sharp turn during the Counter-Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For centuries, the dominant view was Historicism, which interpreted the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation as a continuous map of church history. Protestant Reformers like Luther and Calvin utilized this method to identify the Papacy as the Antichrist and the Roman Church as the Whore of Babylon.[1, 15] In response, the Jesuit order sought to develop alternative interpretive frameworks to shield the Catholic Church from these prophetic assaults.[1, 16]

### Luis de Alcazar and the Systematic Preterist Framework

The Spanish Jesuit Luis de Alcazar (1554–1613) is widely credited with writing the first systematic preterist exposition of prophecy, titled *Vestigatio arcani sensus in Apocalypsi* $(1614)$.[2, 17, 18] Alcazar's brilliance lay in his ability to localize the apocalyptic visions within the first few centuries of the church, effectively pushing the Antichrist into the pagan past and the Millennium into the church's present.[19, 20, 21]

Alcazar's structure for the Book of Revelation was designed to prove that the prophecies had been fulfilled long before the rise of the Papacy:

- **Chapters 4–11**: These were interpreted as the church's struggle against Judaism, culminating in the fall of Jerusalem in $70AD$.[20]

- **Chapters 12–19**: These represented the church's struggle against Roman paganism, ending with the fall of the Western Roman Empire in $476 AD$.[20]
- **Chapters 20–22**: This section was viewed as the church's triumph and the glorious era of the Papal reign in Rome.[20]

By identifying the Beast as Nero or other pagan emperors, Alcazar neutralized the Reformers' claim that the Antichrist was a contemporary or future office of the church.[16] This "clever approach" effectively limited the range of Revelation's prophecies to the first 500 years of church history, providing a historical sanctuary for the Roman Catholic institution.[20]

## The Protestant Appropriation and the Philological Turn

While preterism began as a Catholic defense, it soon found an audience among Protestant scholars who were dissatisfied with the "smoke and mirror hermeneutics" of radical historicists.[22] The movement from a polemical tool to an academic method was spearheaded by Hugo Grotius and Henry Hammond.

### Hugo Grotius and the Historical-Philological Method

The Dutch Protestant Hugo Grotius (1583–1645) was the first significant Protestant to adopt the preterist plan.[2, 19] Grotius was an irenic scholar who sought common ground between Protestants and Catholics to end the religious wars of Europe.[2, 18, 19] In his *Annotationes In Novum Testamentum*, Grotius argued that the texts relating to the Antichrist and the Olivet Discourse had been fulfilled in the first century.[2, 23]

Grotius's contribution was a shift toward a rigorous "historical-philological method." He argued that the meaning of a text must be found in the immediate historical circumstances and linguistic context of the author and the original audience.[18, 19] By prioritizing the "nearness" statements of Jesus and the Apostles, Grotius challenged the Protestant consensus that the Second Coming was a distant, future event.[2] However, his views were met with intense resistance from Protestant historicists who saw preterism as a "Romanist" plot to protect the Pope.[1, 2]

### Henry Hammond and the English Preterist School

Henry Hammond (1605–1660), often called the "Father of English Biblical Criticism," was Grotius's most notable Protestant convert.[2, 18, 19] Hammond found the preterist exposition useful for restoring unity among Christians and authored his own systematic work, *A Paraphrase and Annotations Upon all the Books of the New Testament* $(1653)$.[2, 18, 19]

Hammond's annotations were characterized by a deep engagement with the Greek text and an insistence that the "coming of Christ" mentioned in the Epistles was a "judgment-coming" against the Jewish nation.[2, 23] He borrowing extensively from Grotius and Alcazar but applied the preterist framework with a distinctly Anglican critical flair.[18, 23] Despite his influence, Hammond remained an outlier in the English context for over a century, as the Protestant world continued to prefer the historicist "Whore of Babylon" narrative.[2, 18, 24]

| Comparative Frameworks of 17 th Century Preterists | Luis de Alcazar | Hugo Grotius | Henry Hammon d |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Primary Motivation** | Catholic Counter-Reformation | Ecumenical Unity / Irenicism | Anglican Biblical Criticism |
| **View of Antichrist** | Nero / Pagan Ro me | 1st Century Figur es | 1st Century Figu res |
| **End of Revelation 11** | Fall of Jerusalem (70 AD) | Fall of Jerusalem (70 AD) | Fall of Jerusale m (70 AD) |
| **Scope of Fulfillment** | First 500 years | First 100 years | First 100-400 ye ars |
| **Influence** | Founded Preterist School | First Protestant R ecruit | Father of Englis h Preterism |

## The Eighteenth Century: Rationalism and the Birth of Consistent Preterism

As the Enlightenment took hold, preterism moved from the realm of church defense into the hands of rationalist critics who sought to harmonize the "failed" prophecies of Jesus with historical reality.[19, 25]

### Firmin Abauzit and the First Full Preterist Leap

A pivotal moment in the history of the movement occurred in $1730$ with the Frenchman Firmin Abauzit (1679–1767). Working as a librarian in Geneva, Abauzit wrote *Essai sur l'Apocalypse*, which is recognized as the first "full preterist" exposition.[18] Abauzit's radical thesis was that the *entirety* of the Book of Revelation was dedicated to the destruction of Judea and Jerusalem.[18, 26] He argued that even the "New Jerusalem" in the final chapters was a symbolic depiction of the spread of the church after the $70AD$ catastrophe.[26]

Although Abauzit later recanted his work after a critical response from Leonard Twells, his essay set a precedent for "Consistent Preterism"—the idea that no prophecy remained unfulfilled after the fall of the Temple.[18, 24, 26] This internal evolution represents a causal shift: once the "time markers" of the first century were accepted as binding, the logical end was the exhaustion of all prophetic data within that timeframe.[7, 22]

### J.J. Wetstein and the Systematic Rationalist School

The mid-eighteenth century also saw the influence of Johann Jakob Wetstein, whose textual criticism laid the foundation for the "German Praeterist School".[19] This school, which included figures like Eichhorn and Ewald, utilized preterism not as a confession of faith but as a tool of historical reconstruction.[19, 27] They argued that the apocalyptic expectations of the New Testament were

limited to the "worldview" of the first-century authors, thereby delegitimizing any future-looking application of the text.[19, 27]

## Moses Stuart and the Transatlantic Bridge

The nineteenth century brought preterism to the United States through Moses Stuart (1780–1852) of Andover Seminary.[19] Stuart is widely regarded as the "Father of American Preterism" for his introduction of the system to American evangelicalism around $1842$.[19]

### The 1845 Commentary and the Challenge to Futurism

Stuart's two-volume *Commentary on the Apocalypse* ($1845$) was a masterpiece of exegetical scholarship.[28, 29, 30] Stuart was an evangelical who sought to rescue the Book of Revelation from both the "extravagant chiliasm" (premillennialism) and the "arbitrary interpretations" of the historicists.[27, 31] He argued for a "milder form" of preterism that focused on the defeat of the church's two ancient enemies: Judaism and Pagan Rome.[19]

Stuart's work was innovative in several respects:

1. **Neronian Dating**: He argued that Revelation was written during the reign of Nero (before $70 AD$), making the book a true prophecy of the impending judgment of Jerusalem.[21, 23, 26]
2. **Apologetic Intent**: He used preterism to defend the veracity of Jesus' words. By arguing that "this generation" had indeed seen the fulfillment of the prophecies, he countered rationalist claims that Jesus was a "mistaken" prophet.[25, 32]
3. **Linguistic Rigor**: He relied heavily on the work of German philologists like Lücke and Ewald to establish the first-century context of apocalyptic symbols.[19, 27]

Stuart's influence was profound, laying the groundwork for the later Reformed adoption of partial preterism, which continues to influence modern scholars like R.C. Sproul and Kenneth Gentry.[19, 20, 25]

## James Stuart Russell and the Consummation of the System

The historical trajectory of preterism reaches its logical and systematic climax in the work of the Scottish Congregationalist James Stuart Russell (1816–1895). In $1878$, he published *The Parousia: A Critical Inquiry into the New Testament Doctrine of Our Lord's Second Coming*.[33]

### The Synthesis of Consistent Preterism

Russell's work is the definitive "Full Preterist" manifesto. He argued that the "Parousia" (presence/coming) of Christ was not a protracted process or a distant event but a "summary act—sudden, swift, conspicuous as the lightning" that occurred exclusively in $70 AD$.[34, 35] For Russell, the destruction of Jerusalem was the center of a "cluster of great events" including the end of the age, the judgment of the nation, and the resurrection of the dead.[22, 34]

| Russell's Systematic Corollaries | Fulfilled at AD 70 |
|---|---|
| **The Second Coming (Parousia)** | Christ's judgment-coming in the clouds |
| **The Resurrection** | The raising of the dead from Hades to heaven |
| **The Rapture** | The "snatching up" of the remaining faithful disciples |
| **The Judgment** | The terminal judgment of the Old Covenant nation |
| **The New Creation** | The spiritual renewal of the world in the Church Age |
| **The Millennium** | The transition period between the Cross and AD 70 |

### The "Evidence of Absence" and the Historical Chasm

One of Russell's most distinctive arguments was his response to the objection that there is no historical record of a first-century resurrection or rapture.[33] Russell argued that the "sudden disappearance of so vast a body of believers" took place amidst the "agonies of an expiring nation" and a "foreign invasion".[33] He pointed to a "decades-long chasm" or "total blank" in church history between $70AD$ and the beginning of the second century as evidence that the "great luminaries" of the apostolic church had indeed been removed.[33]

Russell's exegesis was "squarely based" on Matthew 24, which he claimed had its "true and exclusive application" in the destruction of Jerusalem.[22] He argued that any attempt to "elasticize" the time statements to fit a future fulfillment was a "fundamental error" that the church had never recovered from.[7] By insisting that "Scripture prophecy guides us no further" than $70AD$, Russell effectively closed the canon of predictive prophecy, leaving the church to live in the "perfected fellowship" of a fulfilled covenant.[22, 33]

## Causal Trajectories and Theoretical Synthesis

The evolution of preterism from Clement to Russell demonstrates a clear progression of hermeneutical density. What began as a primitive, urgent *expectation* of imminence in the apostolic age [3] was transformed into a *theological necessity* of replacement by Melito [8], a *polemical stratagem* by Alcazar [1], an *academic discipline* by Grotius and Stuart [18, 19], and finally a *comprehensive worldview* by Russell.[33]

The broader implications of this development are twofold. First, preterism shifts the locus of the "Kingdom of God" from a future, physical restoration of the earth to a present, spiritual reality established through the destruction of the Old Covenant "prototype".[10, 36, 37] Second, it creates a "paradigm shift" in biblical interpretation, moving away from the "late great planet earth" cataclysm toward a "Covenant Eschatology" that views the end-times as the transition from one divine economy to another.[2, 7]

### Final Summary of the Preterist Development

The preterist school, while often seen as a reaction to modern eschatological trends, is deeply rooted in the history of the church. Its development can be summarized by the following historical phases:

1. **The Primitive Phase (c. 30–100 AD)**: Characterized by the high-intensity imminence found in the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers like Clement of Rome.
2. **The Typological Phase (c. 100–200 AD)**: Focused on the theological replacement of Israel and the Temple, with Melito of Sardis providing the framework for the "dissolution of the model."
3. **The Polemical Phase (c. 1600–1700 AD)**: Triggered by the Counter-Reformation, where Jesuits like Alcazar codified preterism to protect the Catholic Church from Historicist attacks.
4. **The Critical Phase (c. 1650–1850 AD)**: Led by scholars like Grotius, Hammond, and Moses Stuart, who utilized preterism as a tool for philological and historical biblical study.
5. **The Consistent Phase (c. 1878–Present)**: Culminating in J.S. Russell's *The Parousia*, which argued for the total fulfillment of all prophecy in $70AD$, establishing the modern "Full Preterist" position.

The preterist journey from the "soon and suddenly" of the first century to the "all is past" of the nineteenth century represents one of the most intellectually rigorous and controversial attempts to maintain the integrity of the biblical time-references within the framework of human history.[7, 22, 34, 38]